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ABSTRACT

The vast majority of research on nonverbal behavior has used white college students as subjects. The present investigation examined both white and black subjects' non-verbal behavior and also independently varied the race of the persen with whom the subject interacted. The experimental setting was an actual employment interview. Twenty black and twenty white female undergraduates were individually interviewed by either a black or white male interviewer. White subjects tended to maintain more visual interaction with interviewers of both races than did black subjects. Moreover, black interviewers were visually interacted with less, and given shorter glances. Racial, in contrast to nonracial, questions elicited longer glances and subjects hesitated longer before answering them. Mehrabian's (1967) "immediacy" concept is used to interpret the results. (Author)

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# BLACK-WHITE DIFFERENCES IN NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR IN AN INTERVIEW SETTING[1]

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# BLACK-WHITE DIFFERENCES IN NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR IN AN INTERVIEW SETTING[1]

The many aspects of what has been labeled "nonverbal behavior" have come under increased scrutiny by psychologists in the past decade. Unfortunately, the vast majority of systematic research on this topic has used only white, middle-class, college students as subjects. Since differences between cultures appear to be pronounced in the area of nonverbal behavior (e.g., Hall, 1959, 1966; Little, 1968; Watson & Graves, 1966), it would seem desirable to examine possible subcultural differences within our own heterogeneous culture. Several researchers have noted the importance of exploring subcultural variations. For example, Willis (1966) has warned that speaking distances between people vary sufficiently among subgroups of Americans that statements about Americans in general appear meaningless. Exline (1971) has also noted the need to investigate possible subcultural differences, specifically with regard to visual interaction.

Few studies can be found in the literature comparing the nonverbal behavior of various subcultural groups. An early study by Boas et al. (1936) found that Italian and Jewish immigrants to the United States used markedly

different gestures. Efron's (1941) analysis indicated that the Jewish immigrants had a greater preference for physical closeness and touching. In a more recent study, Willis (1966) found that blacks greet other blacks at further distances than whites greet other whites. Moreover, in this study, the whites tended to greet blacks at greater distances than they did other whites. Frankel and Frankel (1970) argued that blacks have less expressive nonverbal behavior patterns than do whites. Finally, Baxter (1970) compared black, Mexican-American, and white pairs on how closely the individuals in each pair stood next to one another in an outdoor setting. He found that blacks stood the farthest apart, whites at an intermediate distance, while Mexican-Americans stood together the closest.

It is clear that more studies need to be done to determine which nonverbal behaviors are subculture specific and which are found throughout our culture. In addition, because of the current state of racial and ethnic relations, particularly between blacks and whites, these behaviors should be examined in such a way as to make the findings useful in preventing possible misperceptions which might hamper meaningful communication between the various groups. It was with these considerations in mind that the current

study was undertaken.

A type of experimental situation needed to be utilized which would make the results clearly generalizable to important real-life situations. The employment interview was selected as an appropriate experimental vehicle. Certainly, this is a setting in which blacks and whites often interact and which has important consequences for those involved. Although several previous studies have been concerned with racial interviewer-interviewee effects (see Sattler, 1970), none of these studies investigated the effects of black-white interpersonal contact on interviewee nonverbal behavior. Moreover, none of the studies with adults examined both black and white interviewees in one investigation (Sattler, 1970).

In the present study, visual interaction and speech patterns were the nonverbal behaviors selected to be examined. Visual interaction or mutual eye contact has been shown to be related to many situational and personality variables in whites (e.g., Argyle & Dean, 1965; Efran, 1968; Efran & Broughton, 1966; Exline et al., 1961; Goldberg et al., 1969; Kendon, 1967; Kleinke & Pohlen, 1971) and to be an important cue they use in determining how others feel about them (Ellsworth & Carlsmith, 1968; Exline & Eldridge, 1967).

Moreover, duration of answers given and latency in responding to questions were measured as these also seemed to be meaningful indicators of an individual's attitudinal and affective state (e.g., Kramer, 1963; Willard & Strodtbeck, 1972). Thus, the purpose of the present study was to determine whether blacks and whites exhibit similar or different eye contact and speech patterns in an interview setting.

## METHOD

Subjects: Forty female undergraduate students at the University of Akron, 20 black and 20 white, were recruited by telephone.

Interviewers: The interviewers were two middle-class black (ages 20 and 26) and two middle-class white (ages 26 and 27) males. Each interacted with five white and five black interviewees. All interviewers were dressed with a shirt and tie.

Procedure: When the subjects were initially recruited by telephone, they were told that the psychology department needed four "special" persons to help in some experiments. Further, the subjects were informed that if they were selected for the job, after passing an initial interview, they would be paid $15 for two hours work. When a subject arrived for an interview, she was greeted by an interviewer

and led into an experimental room which was disguised to look like a university office. The subject was asked to sit in a chair which was located four feet from the interviewer. The interviewer sat at a desk behind which was a built-in bookcase completely filled with books. Behind the books, located on a shelf that was on the same level as the subject's eyes, was a hidden videotape camera. In addition, a microphone was hidden in the ceiling. No subject reported any awareness of the recording equipment. As soon as the interviewer and subject entered the interview room, an experimenter in an adjoining room started the videotape and other recording equipment.

The interviewer told the subject that he would be asking her a few questions about herself and her feelings about some things in order to get an idea about her qualifications for the job. A standardized set of eight questions was asked each subject. Four of the questions were considered to be of an emotion-provoking nature in that they required the subject to give her personal feelings about black-white relationships. These four racial questions were as follows:

(1) What are <u>your personal</u> feelings about blacks and whites marrying each other and why do you feel this way?

(2) What are <u>your personal</u> feelings about the current black-white situation in this country? What do you feel should be done about it?

(3) How would <u>you personally</u> describe the feelings of blacks and whites toward each other on this campus? How do you feel about it?

(4) Would you or have <u>you personally</u> dated a black (white) man? Why or why not?

The other four questions asked were nonracial and innocuous in nature. They dealt with such topics as past jobs held, college life, college courses, and pastimes. The four nonracial questions were as follows:

(1) Can you tell me a little about the kinds of jobs you've had in the past and whether you liked them or not? What would you like to do in the future?

(2) In general, what do you think about college, or more specifically, what do you think about your experiences here at Akron U?

(3) What college subjects do you like the most, which the least, and why?

(4) What type of things do you like to do in your spare time and why?

The four racial and the four nonracial questions were asked as a block. The order of the two blocks was counterbalanced across subjects.

Behind the subject, and out of her view, was a small

red light which was flashed after the subject spoke for one minute on any given question. When the light flashed, the recording of the dependent variables ceased and the interviewer waited for an opportunity to unobtrusively stop the subject's verbalization before proceeding to the next question. If the subject stopped speaking before the one minute period was finished, she was given a single probe, "Is there anything else?" If she failed to continue verbalizing after the probe, the interviewer proceeded to the next question.

The interviewer recorded the subject's visual interaction by means of a small button attached to the bottom of his chair. This button was connected to a multiplepen event recorder and a cumulative timer located in the adjoining room. The interviewer constantly looked at the subject's eyes but he avoided maintaining an unchanging fixed stare -- following procedures used by Exline et al. (1965). Thus, visual interaction was dependent upon the subject's disposition to avoid or meet the gaze of the interviewer.

After the subject answered the eight questions, she was thanked and told that she would hear from the interviewer in approximately three weeks regarding the job offer.

After all data were collected, subjects were told that they had, in fact, been in an experiment and that their responses had been recorded. Furthermore, they were informed that their anonymity would be protected and if they desired they could have their data removed from the analyses. No subject elected to do so. They were also given the names of the four subjects who were, in fact, paid $15 each.

## RESULTS

Analyses of variance were performed on the following dependent variables: (a) total visual interaction time, (b) duration per eye contact, (c) number of eye contacts, (d) speech duration, and (e) speech latency. Each dependent variable was analyzed using a 2 X 2 X 2 factorial design with repeated measures on the last factor (i.e., race of interviewee, race of interviewer, and racial-nonracial nature of the questions). The means of the visual interaction and speech duration variables in each condition are presented in Table 1.

Visual Interaction With respect to total visual interaction time, the main effect of race of interviewee was significant at the $p=.06$ level ($F=3.80$; $df=1/36$). As can be seen in Table 1, white interviewees tended to maintain more eye contact with both black and white interviewers than did black interviewees. Moreover, both black and white inter-

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Insert Table 1 about here

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viewees maintained significantly more eye contact with the white interviewer than with the black interviewer ($F=6.27$; $df=1/36$; $p<.025$). The least amount of visual interaction occurred when a black interviewee spoke with a black interviewer while the most eye contact took place during white interviewee-white interviewer interactions. In fact, the white-white pairs exhibited over twice as much eye contact as did the black-black dyads. The racially mixed pairs were approximately midway between the same race pairs with respect to total visual interaction time. Somewhat surprisingly, the racial questions did not elicit different total visual interaction times from the nonracial questions. Also, there were no significant interactions with respect to total visual interaction time.

Two significant findings emerged with regard to the average duration per eye contact variable. Black interviewers were given shorter glances than were white interviewers by both black and white interviewees ($F=5.64$; $df=1/36$; $p<.025$). Furthermore, both types of interviewees gave both types of interviewers longer glances when the former were responding to racially oriented questions

($F=8.34$; $df=1/36$; $p< .01$). With respect to number of eye contacts, white interviewees glanced significantly more often at the interviewer than did black interviewees ($F=9.51$; $df=1/36$; $p< .01$). There were no other significant effects found in the number of eye contacts analyses.

Speech Duration All of the F values in the speech duration or verbal output analyses were nonsignificant. The only significant effect for speech latency was that dealing with type of question asked. Both black and white subjects hesitated longer before answering the racial as opposed to the nonracial questions ($F=4.61$; $df=1/36$; $p< .05$).[2]

## DISCUSSION

The results of this experiment provide support for the contention that there are some significant subcultural differences in certain types of nonverbal behavior. In a realistic employment interview setting, white interviewees tended to maintain more eye contact with interviewers than did black interviewees. In addition, white interviewers were visually interacted with more by interviewees of both races than were black interviewers. When these two effects were combined, that is, when white interviewees talked to white interviewers, they spent over twice as much time in visual interaction compared to the black-black pairs.

Racially mixed dyads maintained intermediate levels of eye contact. Consistent with the finding that white interviewees tended to exhibit longer total eye contact time was the finding that they also glanced more often at the interviewer than did black interviewees. Further, black interviewers were given shorter glances than were white interviewers. Perhaps this last finding was the result of subjects being somewhat surprised to see blacks in the role of interviewer and hence they may have been more uncomfortable with them than with the white interviewers. In a previous study, Fugita (in press) has shown that the length of glances subjects give to people is affected by certain characteristics of those other people. Possibly, in the present experiment, subjects felt more uncomfortable with the black interviewers and this discomfort manifested itself in shorter glances. Also, the finding that subjects gave longer glances to the interviewer when they were responding to racial questions may have been the result of their emotional reaction and/or their attempts to influence the interviewer.

Two plausible hypotheses can be suggested to explain why white interviewees engaged in more visual interaction with interviewers than did black interviewees. Research with whites has demonstrated that they maintain more eye

contact with those that they have positive interpersonal attitudes toward (e.g., Exline et al., 1965; Exline & Messick, 1967), and with those from whom they are attempting to elicit positive attitudes (Pelligrini et al., 1970). Perhaps blacks do not subscribe as strongly to the apparent white norm of both indicating and eliciting positive affect from another person by engaging in a greater amount of visual interaction. Possibly, more of this impression management is done through other paralinguistic or kinesic channels such as tone of voice, body tension-relaxation, angle of orientation, or gesturing.

The explanation that is most consistent with previous findings on the nonverbal behavior of blacks is one which assumes that the black subculture is a relatively low "immediacy" one. Mehrabian (1967) defines immediacy behaviors as those which increase the mutual sensory stimulation between persons. Several studies have shown that the various behaviors that index immediacy are quite consistent within different cultures. For example, Watson and Graves (1966) found that Arab students were uniformly more immediate than their American counterparts across a wide variety of nonverbal behaviors; they faced more directly toward each other, stood closer, touched more, had more eye

contact, and talked louder. The findings of Willis (1966) that blacks greet other blacks at greater distances, that of Baxter (1970) that blacks stand further apart from one another, and the present results all suggest low immediacy within the black subculture.

The speech latency analyses demonstrated that subjects hesitated longer before answering racial than nonracial questions. Perhaps the racial questions created emotional arousal or anxiety which interfered with the cognitive or behavioral processes involved in verbalizing an answer (cf., Beam, 1955; Burri, 1931; Luria, 1932). This finding might be interpreted as conflicting with the conclusion of Mahl and Schulze (1964) who, after reviewing the few relevant studies, state that there is no evidence that speech latency is related to anxiety.

Inasmuch as the interviewers were male and the interviewees were female in the present study, there may have been a sexual component underlying the results. Future research should be conducted to determine whether the results found in this experiment would remain the same if either male-male or female-female dyads are examined.

Mehrabian (1972) suggests that, in face-to-face interactions, people rely much more on vocal and facial

cues than on verbal content in determining another's attitude toward them. Therefore, the results of this experiment dealing with the differences in nonverbal behavior between blacks and whites are important. The fact that large differences in the use of nonverbal cues were found between blacks and whites suggests that some possible misperceptions between these two groups may be due to these differences.

Table 1

Means of the Nonverbal

Behaviors in Each Condition[1]

| Nonverbal Behaviors | White Interviewer | | Black Interviewer | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | White Interviewee | Black Interviewee | White Interviewee | Black Interviewee |
| Total visual interaction time (sec.) | 190.48 | 150.48 | 136.64 | 86.64 |
| Duration per eye contact (sec.) | 2.54 | 2.27 | 1.77 | 1.72 |
| Number of eye contacts | 77.36 | 64.72 | 77.44 | 49.52 |
| Speech duration (sec./min.) | 36.97 | 38.47 | 36.65 | 30.59 |

[1]Speech latency data are not presented in this table. Emotion-provoking questions yielded a mean speech latency of 2.97 seconds while innocuous questions yielded a mean of 2.14 seconds.

## FOOTNOTES

[1]The authors wish to express their appreciation to the following persons for serving as interviewers or for their assistance in coding the data: Dan James, Wayne Nemeroff, Elliott Purcell, Tom Rand, and Pathan Swope. In addition, thanks are due to Pete Hunt for his help in setting up the electronic equipment and Kerry Crosby for his aid in analyzing the data.

[2]Further analyses were conducted using only data from the first half of the interview. This eliminated possible order effects in the presentation of the racial and non-racial questions. The results of these analyses, once again, demonstrated that neither race of the interviewee or interviewer interacted with the nature of the question.

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